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EST. 1817

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Bicci di Lorenzo (Florence 1373-1452 Arezzo)

The Virgin and Child with Saints Agnes, Thomas Aquinas, Dominic, Catherine of Alexandria, Peter Martyr and John the Baptist, with a music making angel and a donor

Tempera on panel, gold ground, shaped top, in an engaged frame

painted surface: 17 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 9 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. (43.5 x 24 cm.)
overall: 19 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 11 $\frac{3}{8}$ in. (50.3 x 28.9 cm.)

Painted c.1410



Provenance

Acquired by the father of the present owner, by 1965;
Thence by inheritance and descent until 2024.

Literature

H. Mayer Brown, 'Catalogus. A Corpus of Trecento pictures with Musical Subject Matter', part II/1, instalment 4, in *Imago Musicae*, 5, 1988, p. 220, no. 641, reproduced p. 221 (as Bicci di Lorenzo).

Kult Bild – Das Altar- und Andachtsbild von Duccio bis Perugino. Cult Image – Altarpiece and Devotional Painting from Duccio to Perugino, J. Sander (ed.), exh. cat., Städel Museum, Frankfurt, 2006, p. 304, no. 56, reproduced in colour pl. 65 (as Bicci di Lorenzo di Biccì).

S. Weppelmann, 'Kollektives Ritual und persönliche Andacht – Collective Ritual and Personal Devotion' in *Kult Bild – Das Altar- und Andachtsbild von Duccio bis Perugino. Cult Image – Altarpiece and Devotional Painting from Duccio to Perugino*, J. Sander (ed.), exh. cat., Städel Museum, Frankfurt, 2006, pp. 225, 244 and 246, no. 56, reproduced in colour p. 227, pl. 65 (as Bicci di Lorenzo di Biccì).

Exhibited

Frankfurt, Städel Museum, *Kult Bild Das Altar- und Andachtsbild von Duccio bis Perugino. Cult Image – Altarpiece and Devotional Painting from Duccio to Perugino*, 7 July – 22 October 2006, no. 56, reproduced in colour (as Bicci di Lorenzo di Biccì).

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Intimate in scale, this portable panel is a highly appealing example of the devotional work of Bicci di Lorenzo. It retains in beautifully preserved state the fine detailing of the figures and delicate punchwork in the gold haloes and pinnacle. The work is representative of the rich tapestry of early fifteenth-century religious art in Florence and reflects the gradual shift in style from the late Gothic to the early Renaissance that characterises the period.

From a family of artists, Bicci di Lorenzo was the son and pupil of Lorenzo di Bicci (*d.* 1427) and the father of Neri di Bicci (1419–1491). His early works are influenced by the style of his father, whose successful workshop he continued to run after the latter's death. Bicci became a member of the Guild of St Luke in 1424 and enjoyed a long and prolific career, securing many prestigious commissions; to name but one – and on a very different scale to the present painting – the altarpiece of the Compagni chapel in Florence's Santa Trinita, now in Westminster Abbey, London.¹

Scholars who have written and commented on this little devotional painting underscore its Dominican focus, noting the presence of Saint Dominic, at the upper left, as well as St Thomas Aquinas, centre left, and St Peter Martyr, centre right, all of them dressed in the distinctive black and white habit of their order. Also, prominent here, positioned to the right of the Virgin and Child, is St John the Baptist, the forerunner of Christ, pointing others to Jesus and holding the scroll inscribed with the words '*Ecce Agnus [Dei]*' ('Behold the Lamb of God'). The presence of the kneeling figures of Saints Agnes and Catherine in the foreground underscores the role of the saints in the spiritual lives of Christians.

An unusual feature of this painting is the inclusion of a child, rather than an adult donor figure. He is shown here beside a music-making angel and with saints interceding on his behalf to the Virgin and Child. Gaudenz Freuler (Professor emeritus, University of Zurich), pointing out that this is a Dominican painting due to the presence of St Dominic, St Thomas Aquinas, as well as St Peter Martyr, went on to suggest that the child could be the boy Tobias – an exemplar of filial piety.² His presence here would be an allusion to the biblical story taken from the Book of Tobit in the Apocrypha (6: 2–9), in which Tobias, the son of Tobit, meets the archangel Raphael without realizing his divine nature, and is later instructed to use the gall from the fish that he had caught to restore his father's sight. Arguing against this identification is the absence of the fish with which Tobias is usually shown and if this were indeed Raphael – the embodiment of the

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concept of the 'guardian angel' and protector of the young – his attribute is atypical as he is not usually depicted playing a musical instrument.

Stefan Weppelmann (former Curator of Italian and Spanish Renaissance Paintings at the Gemäldegalerie, Berlin, and now Director of the Museum der bildenden Künste, Leipzig), in the catalogue of the exhibition on devotional painting held at the Städel Museum, Frankfurt, in 2006, where this painting was included, argues that the boy is being presented to the Virgin and Child by a Dominican friar (in all likelihood St Peter Martyr) who appeals for mercy on his behalf. Albeit that in Weppelmann's opinion the boy depicted cannot have been the donor, it was not unusual for contemporary figures to be portrayed in pictures 'with the salvation of their souls uppermost in their minds'; and so, the painted figure stands in for the real person and the saints serve as patron saints.

A portable triptych, comparable in scale to the present work but with only St John the Baptist and St Catherine flanking the Virgin and Child in the central panel and retaining the wings with narrative scenes of the Passion of Christ and the Annunciation, sold in these Rooms on 4 July 2007, lot 46, for £168,000 (fig.1).

¹ Polyptych, tempera on panel, 210 x 292 cm.; Fototeca Zeri, Fondazione Zeri, Bologna, no. 10297.

² Written communication with the previous owner dated 1991.

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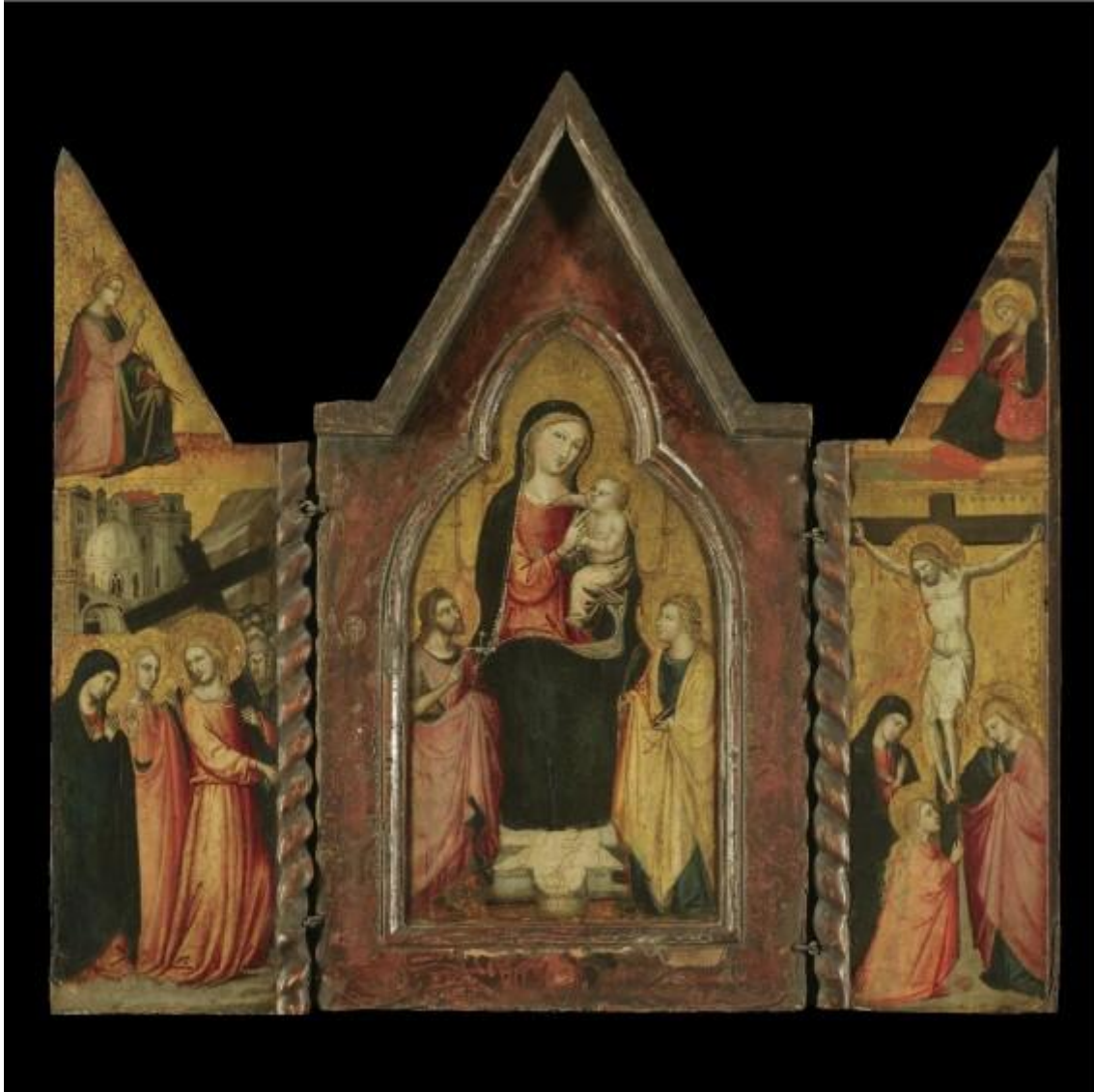


Fig. 1: Bicci di Lorenzo, *A portable triptych: central panel: The Madonna and Child with Saints John the Baptist and Catherine; wings: Christ on the way to Calvary with the Angel of the Annunciation above; the Crucifixion with the Virgin Annunciate above*, Sotheby's, London, on 4 July 2007, lot 46, sold for £168,000.